

VZCZCXR08305
RR RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHAM #3329/01 3520946
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 170946Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY AMMAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3983
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 AMMAN 003329

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/18/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM IS JO

SUBJECT: U.S.-JORDAN POLITICAL DIALOGUE ADDRESSES REGIONAL ISSUES, CONTEXT AND MECHANICS OF DOMESTIC REFORM

REF: AMMAN 3167

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: Following the signature of a joint MOU on assistance September 22, the first session of a U.S.-Jordan political dialogue convened in Amman on November 17 (Reftel).

Jordan was represented by FM Salah Al-Bashir and members of his staff, while the American side was represented by S/P Director David Gordon, DRL A/S David Kramer, NEA DAS David Hale, and Ambassador Beecroft. Discussion topics included the broad range of regional issues, including the peace process, Iranian influence, and their effects on domestic political realities. On the domestic front, discussion focused on reform and advancement of Jordan's National Agenda. Bashir expressed confidence that Jordan was moving forward on political reforms but asserted that lasting change would have to be "homegrown." The FM criticized parliament, blaming economic conditions and tribal politics for the slow pace of reforms. Progress on women's rights would require a cultural shift and more focus from the government, while public sector reform would be among the toughest issues to tackle, Bashir asserted. Finally, the group discussed the future of the dialogue process, with general agreement that the joint economic dialogue called for in the MOU should commence by the end of 2008, and the political reform dialogue should continue at six month intervals, with the next session taking place in May 2009. End Summary.

Regional Issues

¶12. (C) Bashir expressed uneasiness over the Middle East peace process given the upcoming U.S. transition, saying a return to the pre-Annapolis pace would be "disastrous." Reflecting on the Annapolis process, the FM characterized behind-the-scenes achievements as impressive, especially in light of ongoing tensions on the ground. Even so, "we failed on the settlement issue," Bashir stated, complaining that Israel is attempting to negotiate while changing the situation on the ground through further expansion of settlements. He asserted that negotiations need to be comprehensive, with broader talks including the thorny issues of refugees and Jerusalem.

¶13. (C) Bashir said constructive discussions would now need to be recorded in a draft agreement as a starting point for the Obama administration. The FM reported he told Livni as much during a recent meeting in which the two discussed the need to maintain forward momentum in the peace process through the Israeli election season. Livni reportedly told the FM she would be "tactical" on peace process issues during the campaign to minimize any added value for parties in Israel who oppose further forward progress.

¶14. (C) The FM voiced frustration over the handling of recent Israeli prisoner transfers. When Israel hands over prisoners to Hezbollah with no further conditions, it proves that "fanaticism delivers," Bashir asserted. In contrast,

Jordanian prisoners in Israeli jails are transferred with the understanding that they will serve out the remainder of their terms - in Bashir's view. This contrast between how Hizballah's and Jordanian prisoners are handled empowers radicals who are not constrained by government-to-government relations. As an example, Bashir noted that any agreement between Hamas and Israel about captive Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit would weaken the bargaining position of Abu Mazen's government in the conflict over the Palestinian presidency. "If a Shalit deal comes before January 9, you can kiss Abu Mazen goodbye," Bashir said.

¶ 15. (C) Bashir brought up continuing Jordanian concerns about expanding Iranian influence, noting that the new Iraqi government had a "tendency to appease Iran." Now that Jordan has an ambassador to Iraq, the FM expressed a desire to see a stronger Jordanian-Iraqi relationship as a bulwark against Iranian interests. Bashir voiced Jordan's need to be consulted on American policy toward Iran, warning that the nuclear issue should not overshadow what Jordan calls the "hegemony" issue, referring to Iran's efforts to dominate the Arab-Muslim world.

The Context of Domestic Reform

¶ 16. (C) The FM and his Foreign Ministry colleagues presented domestic reform through their optic of the regional issues, which they presented as inherently intertwined with domestic realities. Even with the regional challenges, they acknowledged the need for political reform in Jordan, and asserted that it would have to come in tandem with cultural

AMMAN 00003329 002 OF 004

and social change. Bashir asserted that Jordan is confidently moving forward with the reform plan envisioned in the National Agenda and the leadership of the King. "The trend is consistent" toward reform, he said, in spite of occasional backward movement in response to specific incidents. At the same time, the FM noted that "change creates nervousness," adding that it "has to be homegrown" and directed from the top. Bashir acknowledged that selling the National Agenda is not always easy and that there is no concrete plan for implementation over time.

¶ 17. (C) The U.S. interlocutors noted there is no single road to reform and Jordanian reforms would ultimately proceed because they are in the GOJ's national interest. Dr. Gordon stated that the US is invested in Jordan's success, and advancing political reforms and good governance are key elements of this success. They also made the point that reform in Jordan would have to be homegrown, but the government could learn from examples of other countries. There are a number of mechanisms already in place that the United States supports, such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), to assist and encourage Jordan's own reform agenda from within. Jordan has the potential to serve as a model for countries in the region that struggle to balance security and civil liberties. While the pace of reforms is debatable, decision-makers in Washington need to see Jordan is moving forward to justify maintaining funding levels.

¶ 18. (C) Calling parliament "one area where buy-in didn't work," Bashir portrayed it as one of the primary obstacles to the National Agenda's vision. MPs are focused more on services and are less attuned to the broad scope of policy, he said. "If an MP calls me for an appointment, it's never about a public issue," but instead is usually about patronage appointments, the FM complained. Even so, Bashir acknowledged that the current parliament is making strides, particularly in the queries they pose to ministers in sessions designated for "question time." The FM portrayed parliament's weakness as a consequence of Jordan's electoral system, in which voters cast their ballots based on tribal affiliation rather than on political tendencies.

¶9. (C) Bashir hailed the advent of Jordan's Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), expressing hope that the organization's efforts would yield convictions soon. Addressing Jordan's recent slippage in international corruption indices, Bashir asserted that the surveys measure public opinion rather than actual corruption. On the issue of "wasta" (influence-peddling), Bashir noted that the practice is now officially illegal but conceded that it is still prevalent as there is little demand from Jordan's population for accountability.

¶10. (C) Calling public sector reform one of the most difficult issues in Jordan, the FM conceded that successive governments had failed to make a dent in the system of entitlements and influence-peddling. Most appointments private citizens seek with the FM are not issued-oriented but connected with a request for individual employment. Bashir drew connections between economic development and the political will necessary to make Jordan's government more efficient. If public services continue to fail to deliver, the FM believes the government and parliament will remain trapped in the cycle of patronage appointments to the civil service as a means of maintaining tribal legitimacy.

¶11. (C) Political Islam was a leitmotif of the discussion. Bashir and his colleagues theorized that the influence of the Islamists is waning. While the slogan "Islam is the solution" may have worked in the early 1990s, the FM asserted that the party had failed to follow up vague electoral rhetoric with concrete policy suggestions.

Specific Reform Efforts

¶12. (C) When the conversation turned to specific reforms, DAS Hale observed that although Jordan has come a long way on governance reforms, the pace has slowed in recent months, and it is now unclear whether moderate/reformist forces within the government have the upper hand. Regarding some of the specifics:

- A/S Kramer raised concerns with the controversial Law on Associations (commonly referred to as the "NGO Law"), saying its permission regime for foreign funding is unnecessarily restrictive. He inquired what else would be effective diplomatically for the United States to do, aside from quietly advocating for amendments to the law. The FM professed a degree of ignorance about the Law on Associations, and asked for a white paper outlining specific

AMMAN 00003329 003 OF 004

revisions the USG would like to see.

- Kramer noted the GOJ's changing attitudes toward women's rights and so-called honor crimes but asserted that there must be effective means to deter such crimes and adequately punish offenders. Specifically, article 98 and other discriminatory laws in the Constitution need to be abolished. The FM asserted that official and non-official media are now active in publicizing "honor crimes," a step toward creating awareness among the broader population and generating political will for a solution. Most of his colleagues from the MFA believe public acceptance of the practice would need to end before the Parliament could change any laws. The FM conceded that the issue "requires a fresh look" to close loopholes in the law that lead to relatively short, if any, sentences for perpetrators of "honor crimes." Bashir hinted that newly appointed Chief Justice Fuad Sweidan has a specific mandate to address the issue.

- On press freedom, Kramer acknowledged the progress inherent in recent reforms to the Press and Publications Law and the positive step of abolishing jail sentences for journalists. However, the enormous fines levied on journalists for infractions should be revisited. Local

officials and law enforcement bodies need to be brought fully on board with the King's recently stated vision for press freedom. In response, Bashir stated that transparency is "still a value in Jordan" despite occasional backward steps.

- Kramer raised the issue of Government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) in Jordan and asked if they are crowding out genuinely independent bodies politically and financially. Bashir responded that the top-down nature of reform in Jordan necessitated the use of GONGOs as liaisons between the government and civil society. GONGOs (and more specifically in Jordan's case, royally funded endowments) help to "create political space" and set the terms of reform efforts, he said. GONGOs are also more efficient in delivering services in Jordan than private organizations, he asserted. Bashir noted he is "extremely frustrated" that Jordanian civil society has failed to develop its role to complement and support the government's efforts. (Comment: Bashir's comments are indicative of GOJ thinking about civil society: it is there to help and assist the government. End comment.) The group discussed how GONGOs appear to have hindered the development of independent civil society, as it is difficult to compete against organizations that enjoy funding and royal patronage.

- A/S Kramer also addressed engaging civil society in the next round of this reform dialogue. The FM was skittish about bringing civil society into the talks and preferred to keep it government-to-government. However, both sides saw value in engaging civil society leaders in parallel discussions at the next meeting.

Next Steps

¶13. (SBU) When conversation shifted to next steps, the FM broached the issue of conditionalities. The U.S. interlocutors responded that the United States does not seek to impose conditions through the dialogue but rather seeks a frank, strategic discussion about governance issues. Both sides agreed that the afternoon's discussion had been valuable and that the political reform dialogue should continue at six month intervals, with the next meeting in May.

- In keeping with the MOU, the Jordanians listed a few priorities to focus discussion more specifically in the next round of talks: governance issues, labor rights, women's rights, media freedom, and strengthening civil society.

- The group also discussed the economic dialogue and agreed to work out the specifics of a meeting in the near future. They generally agreed that the informal nature of the meeting was productive, and the FM proposed that the principals remain in touch possibly by e-mail or listserv.

¶14. (C) U.S. interlocutors suggested the importance of bringing in participants from other government agencies in the US and Jordan, in both the economic and political dialogues. The Jordanian delegation, however, did not decide whether that would be desirable. At numerous points during the day it was clear the Foreign Ministry was not the best interlocutor on some specific reform topics. A more substantive discussion on domestic reform strategies could be had with a broader governmental representation, including other Ministries. Various names for the dialogue process were proposed, but no agreement was reached, particularly given

AMMAN 00003329 004 OF 004

Jordanian concerns about public sensitivities to U.S.-Jordan governance talks.

Comment

¶15. (C) The first session of the political dialogue proved to be an ice-breaker in which Jordanian officials aired their views on barriers to reform while avoiding talk of action to overcome those barriers. The challenge for the next session will be to build on the productive informality of the first round to focus narrowly on the specific areas in which the United States and Jordan can work together to advance the reform agenda. The temptation on the Jordanian side will be to revisit the series of caveats and stall on discussions of substance. To avoid this, an expansion of the dialogue to other ministries will be necessary. A broader conversation will allow for a multi-layered, strategy-oriented talk in which conservatives and liberals within the government can talk about their vision of "homegrown" progress.

¶16. (U) This cable has been cleared by S/P Director David Gordon, DRL A/S David Kramer, and NEA DAS David Hale.
Beecroft